Middle East

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The Muslim Middle East in the 21st Century

What will be the face of Islam in the twenty-first century? A preoccupation with the future is always acute at the turning of a century, still more so at the turning of a millennium. The speculation about world futures, from the optimistic 'Endism' of Francis Fukuyama to the pessimistic 'Clash of Civilizations' of Samuel Huntington, is already well under way in the West.

In the predictions of these generalists, Islam and the Muslim world receive fairly short shrift, at least as far as their internal evolution is concerned. The generalists have been criticized by the area specialists, on the usual grounds that the generalists do not know enough about Islam or Muslims to generalize. But the critics have yet to engage in the same kind of controlled speculation, or to provide alternatives of their own. Over the last century, the most commonplace prediction for the future of Islam has been its renaissance along Western lines. Commenting on the trend in Islamic thought in the 1880s, the English poet-explorer Wilfrid Scawen Blunt wrote that it 'stood in close analogy to what we have seen of the reawakening of the Christian intellect during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Europe and its adaptation of orthodox doctrines to the scientific discoveries of the day.'[1] An American observer put the same idea this way in 1963: 'Perhaps the Arab world in this century is in the first pages of a renaissance that may ultimately be comparable to the changes that took place in Western society in the fifteenth century.'[2] 'If my suspicion is correct,' writes a leading American anthropologist in 1998, 'we will look back on the latter half of the 20th century as a time of change as profound for the Muslim world as the Protestant Reformation was for Christendom.'[3] This expectation of reformation is a recurring theme in the Western vision of Islam. It leaves nothing to predict but the proximate emergence of a Luther, followed by the modernization of Islam and the emergence of democratic governance. Yet while the twentieth century has been the stage of numerous 'revolutions' in the name of the people or the nation or Islam, it could well be argued that Muslims have failed to resolve issues which appeared on their agenda a century ago. Indeed, the more instructive analogy may not be with the fifteenth century in Europe, but with the end of the nineteenth century in the Middle East.

1900 and 2000: BACK TO THE FUTURE

Indeed, there are striking parallels between the end of the nineteenth century and the end of the twentieth. And if repetition is one possible scenario, analogous reasoning may offer some clue to the future.

The global context

It is the global context which defines the parameters of action in the Middle East. Then as now, preservation of the status quo in the Middle East was a prime interest of the great powers. The European order itself seemed stable: there had been no major European war since the end of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871. Great Britain, anxious to guarantee its access to India, became effective guarantor of the existing order in the Middle East. The foundations of that order were being eroded by nationalism in Egypt, and Britain had acted to protect the route to India by occupying Egypt. Yet it also became the champion of the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, and led the powers in shoring up the status quo.

Is this not similar to the situation today? The West now also enjoys a long peace, secured through détente and the end of the cold war. Under the Pax Americana, the US guarantees the world's access to oil at reasonable prices, and when that access has been challenged, the US has moved to restore and keep its peace, as it did following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The US role in managing the Arab-Israeli peace process is no less an example of its status as ultimate guarantor. The US largely acts off shore, without the need for prolonged occupations, but its ability to project power is still formidable.

Ultimately it is the US that underwrites the stability and status quo of the Middle East. But if a repetition is possible, then perhaps the Middle Eastern order will be buffeted by some dramatic shift in the international order. It has always been difficult for one outside power to maintain hegemony in the Middle Eastern system, the very structure of which invites challenges. A century ago, there was a Pax Britannica, but the first decades of the twentieth century saw a gradual emergence of continental powers rivalling Britain in Europe and overseas. These rivalries were carried over into the Middle East; they ultimately led to war and the break-up of the Ottoman Empire. If rivals to the United States emerge over the next twenty years, might their rivalry spill over into the Middle East? Unified Europe is on the doorstep of the Middle East, has a vital interest in its stability, and is already staking out independent policies. When China begins to emerge from the role of regional power to that of a world power, the Middle East will be of paramount importance to it, on account of China's growing energy needs. If Europe and China assert themselves in the Middle East, might this undermine or upset the order America now guarantees?

The Domestic Stalemate

At the end of both centuries, the regimes of the region seemed not only stable, but unassailable. In the Ottoman Empire, Sultan Abdülhamid II had come to power in 1876, and would continue until 1908, a reign of 32 years. In the Qajar Empire, Nasir al-Din Shah had just ended a 48-year reign, which had commenced in 1846 and ended with his assassination in 1896. Their long personal rule epitomized the long period of political immobility that seemed to characterize the last two decades of the last century.

Today, too, the Middle East is ruled by the same men who ruled it a generation ago and more. King Hussein has ruled Jordan since 1953. King Hasan has ruled Morocco since 1961. Asad has presided over Syria since 1971. Qadhdhafi made his coup in Libya in 1969. Arafat has been chairman of the PLO since 1969. Kuwait's Emir has ruled Kuwait since 1978, with help from foreign friends who restored him to his throne. Iraq's Saddam Hussein has been president since 1979, and Egypt's Mubarak since 1981. The Arab lands are today the last preserve of protracted individual rule in the world. This is a symptom of political immobility, of a failure to find any way to regulate political change. In this respect, the parallel between the end of both centuries is almost exact.

But the first decade of the twentieth century saw two constitutional revolutions, in both the Ottoman Empire and Iran. Is it possible that beneath the surface of today's authoritarian rule, there are forces coalescing that could try to establish limits on the arbitrary powers of rulers? Might these forces be capable, in another decade or so, of effecting constitutional revolutions? (Today we would probably call them 'democratic revolutions.') Whether they would succeed is another matter, but the turmoil they would unleash might see the triumph of the same populist forces that first appeared in the beginning of this century, in the guise of nationalism.

The Islamic Factor

Towards the end of the last century, there had been a revival of Islam, and even an Islamic revolution in Sudan. That revolution, taking a millenarian and Mahdist form, had defied the great power of the day, Britain, and had established an Islamic state in 1885 that lasted thirteen years, until Britain destroyed it by force. Elsewhere in the Muslim world, other revivalist movements seemed to threaten the status quo.

Does this not closely parallel our own times? This, too, has been a period of Islamic revival. There has been an Islamic revolution in Iran, also with strong millenarian overtones, defying the great power of our own day, America. (The US was traumatized by the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran in ways reminiscent of the shock delivered to Britain by Gordon's fate at Khartoum.) Elsewhere, in the rest of what used to be called the 'Northern Tier,' Islamists have made themselves felt in Turkey, and they have taken complete power in Afghanistan. South of Egypt, bulwark of US influence in the Arab Middle East, Sudan is also under Islamist rule. And of course other Islamist movements have emerged to challenge the status quo.

But the first decade or so of the twentieth century saw the containment, then the decline, of Islam as a focus of political allegiance. Is it not possible that in a decade's time, the Islamic revival will also appear as a phase that exhausted itself, as other ideologies of power more directly inspired by the West make their long-delayed comeback? Already there are signs that the Islamist surge has been blunted. Might it even be reversed?

The Minority Factor

A century ago, European and local minorities in the Middle East were at the peak of their influence, from Algeria to Tunisia, from Egypt to Syria. They were the engines of economic growth, and they formed a target of growing Muslim resentment.

The new nationalism identified the erosion of minority power as an immediate objective, so that no minorities exercise this kind of influence in any Arab state today. But today, a concentration of five million Jews in the state of Israel, with strong links to the West, has acquired immense military and economic power. As in the past, this exercise of non-Muslim power in the heart of the Muslim world is the cause of a continuing Muslim resentment. Might the erosion of Israel's power remain a prime objective of the Arab world, whether pursued through diplomacy or confrontation? If so, the Arab-Israeli conflict, rather than ending in final peace agreements, may have entered a new phase.

More parallels could be drawn, some more persuasive than others. The historian might well be tempted to borrow the phrase coined by an American athlete: déjà vu all over again. Still, the repetition of history is not its replication, and many of today's realities have no parallel. Two are particularly striking: the dissemination of weapons of mass destruction, and the explosion of populations. These are the two wild cards that could well shatter the existing political and social structure of the Middle East and bring on ungovernable change. They would create difficulties not only for the West, but dangers for the peoples of the Middle East itself.

Islamic Reformation?

No doubt, there will be crises and changes – but a reformation? A century ago, the great Islamicist Ignaz Goldziher predicted that Islam could be regenerated from within – not through a 'return to the Qur'an' which, 'contrary to the laws of historical evolution, risks putting Islam behind instead of modernizing it,' but rather through bold, rational reinterpretation.[4] It did not happen. In the twentieth century, some Muslims simply abandoned Islam for Western doctrines, and others opted for the 'return to the Qur'an,' embodied in a militant and aggrieved fundamentalism.

If a reform is in the making, the work of adaptation has not yet even begun. An American historian of Islam has put it succinctly: 'The ideas that will be taken as the most authoritative synthesis of Islam and modern conditions fifty years from now have not yet been thought and are not on the current agenda.'[5] If the thoughts have not been thought, if the issues have not been defined, then the twentieth century can only be described as an opportunity lost. Its repetition is something even a faith as vibrant as Islam can ill afford. ◆▶

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Notes

1. Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1907), *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt*. London: Unwin, p. 102. The reference here is to Jamal al-Din 'al-Afghani.
2. Charles F. Gallagher, 'Language, Culture, Ideology: The Arab World,' in: K.H. Silvert (ed.) *Expectant Peoples: Nationalism and Development*, New York: Random House, 1963, p. 229.
3. Dale F. Eickelman, 'Inside the Islamic Reformation,' *Wilson Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (winter 1998), p. 82.
4. Ignaz Goldziher, 'L'Avenir de l'Islam,' *Questions diplomatiques et coloniales* (Paris) 11, no. 102 (15 May 1901), pp. 600-2.
5. Richard W. Bulliet, 'Rhetoric, Discourse, and the Future of Hope,' in: Richard W. Bulliet (ed.) *Under Siege: Islam and Democracy*, New York: Middle East Institute, Columbia University, 1994, pp. 11-12.